

Cultivating Critical Thinking Skills among Military Academy Students

-- Taking College English Course as an Example

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Abstract. In order to implement the new era's military education policy, it is essential for military academy students to possess critical thinking skills to cope with the complex and ever-changing battlefield conditions. However, the cultivation of critical thinking skills is not only a common challenge faced by higher education but also a weakness in talent development within the College English course. It is challenging for instructors to address other qualities that "high-quality" talents should possess, especially critical thinking skills, innovative abilities, and independent problem-solving capabilities. This article primarily analyzes how to enhance and cultivate critical thinking skills among military academy students within the context of College English teaching. The article first emphasizes the importance of critical thinking skills for military academy students and provides an overview of domestic and international approaches to cultivate these skills. It also identifies the challenges faced in cultivating critical thinking skills at military academies and explores methods and approaches to foster critical thinking skills from the perspectives of instructors, students, and institutions.

Keywords: Critical Thinking Skills; College English; Military Academy Students.

1. Introduction

In the field of modern education, the cultivation of critical thinking skills is not only a common pursuit among world-class universities but also one of the core goals of higher education in China. The motivation behind this research stems from the consensus within the foreign language world regarding the importance of cultivating critical thinking skills among university students, as well as the different evaluations of the current status of critical thinking skills development among military academy students. In order to comprehensively implement President Xi's military education policy in the new era, adhering to the principles of moral education, talent development, and education for war, critical thinking skills are essential qualities and abilities that military officers in leadership and command positions must possess. However, a common issue in talent development within military academies is the significant disparity between the knowledge and skills taught in academic institutions and the abilities required for military positions[1]. In the complex and ever-changing real battlefield, there are many uncertain factors. If military command talents trained solely through academic education only possess knowledge from textbooks and instruction by instructors, without the ability to analyze and judge scientifically through their own critical thinking skills, they will not be able to adapt to the reality of the battlefield. To address this problem, it is not enough to rely solely on existing teaching experiences; emphasis must be placed on the cultivation of thinking patterns, particularly critical thinking skills.

2. Review of Research on Critical Thinking Skills in Military and Non-Military Contexts

Research on critical thinking skills began in the 1980s, marked by the inaugural International Conference on Critical Thinking and Educational Reform held in the United States. Richard Paul, the Chairman of the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking, and educational psychologist Linda Elder[2] provided an authoritative definition of critical thinking skills. As society continued to evolve, educators proposed new directions for educational culture. Ballard and Clancy[3] suggested that by using critical thinking skills as a medium and guiding principle, educational culture could



ultimately develop a group of individuals who not only possess critical thinking skills but also have the courage to explore unknown domains and the ability to create and innovate. Thus, the importance of critical thinking skills in the new era is evident, and the key question is how to cultivate individuals with these skills. People believe that training individuals using thinking tools is crucial.

In terms of cultivating students' critical thinking skills in foreign language teaching, experts from both military and non-military backgrounds have conducted relatively mature research. As early as 10 years ago, some experts of foreign language teaching led by Sun Youzhong[4] explored the paths and methods for deepening the cultivation of critical thinking skills. They advocated reforms in six areas: goals of cultivation, curriculum design, teaching methods, assessment, textbook development, and teacher professional development. In terms of assessment, Sun Youzhong [5] and other experts analyzed the relationship between the foreign language curriculum assessment system and the cultivation of critical thinking skills.

The research on critical thinking in foreign military academies has a long history. When searching for "critical thinking" in the library of US military academies, hundreds of articles appear, ranging from "calls for cultural change" to "leadership development problem-solving methods." The US military believes that critical thinking plays a crucial role in improving officers' decision-making abilities, innovation capabilities, and work efficiency. They have developed critical thinking models, established rigorous mechanisms for critical thinking, and implemented relevant courses in military professional education to cultivate officers' critical thinking skills from multiple dimensions[6]. Foreign academies generally believe that thinking methods should be integrated into the military training systematically. They advocate incorporating critical thinking skills throughout the entire teaching process to ensure sustainable development.

However, research on critical thinking in domestic military academies is relatively limited. Ai Zhihua[7] suggests that the cultivation of critical thinking skills should be approached from two dimensions: the awareness of instructors and the learning attitude of students. It is necessary to overcome issues such as students' inadequate understanding of English classroom teaching, excessive class size, and instructors' lack of teaching philosophy. Currently, the most urgent task is to recognize the main challenges in cultivating students' critical thinking skills in military academies.

3. Problems in Cultivating Critical Thinking Abilities Among Military Academy Students

There are several challenges in cultivating critical thinking skills among military academy students. Firstly, students have limited understanding of the importance of developing thinking skills. They often have misconceptions that language classes solely involve memorizing vocabulary, reading texts, or translating sentences, without realizing the potential for enhancing their thinking abilities, let alone fostering critical thinking skills. Moreover, there is a divergence of opinions among students regarding the necessity of critical thinking. Some even believe that military academy students should simply follow superiors' commands and don't need critical thinking skills. This poses a significant challenge to cultivate critical thinking among students in military academies.

Furthermore, there is a significant disparity in students' English language proficiency, which hinders their ability to accurately comprehend and express their thoughts, impeding the development of critical thinking skills. Secondly, the researches on critical thinking among the instructors are inadequate. Questions such as what constitutes critical thinking, which cognitive skills and thinking qualities form the core of critical thinking, and how to create an environment conducive to cultivating critical thinking in the classroom, need to be addressed. Without a clear understanding of these issues, it becomes challenging for instructors to effectively cultivate students' critical thinking skills.

Additionally, traditional language teaching in the classroom tends to focus more on memorization and lacks relevant elements for developing critical thinking skills. Moreover, instructors often lack appropriate standards and methods to evaluate students' thinking abilities, which hampers the effectiveness of thinking assessment. From an institutional perspective, the talent development goals

of military academies need to align with the “College English Curriculum Requirements” outlined by higher education institutions. However, many academies do not explicitly recognize the central role of cultivating critical thinking skills, and there is a lack of dedicated courses specifically focusing on developing thinking skills.

4. Ways to Cultivate Critical Thinking Skills Among Military Academy Students

Scholars agree on the necessity of cultivating critical thinking skills among military academy students. The most pressing task, therefore, is how to develop students' critical thinking abilities in military academies.

4.1. Enhancement of Instructors' Critical Thinking Skills and Awareness

As the saying goes, “It takes a good blacksmith to make a good steel.” In order to cultivate students' critical thinking abilities, instructors must first enhance their understanding and awareness of critical thinking. As an English instructor at a university, one should grasp the methods and pathways for developing critical thinking skills and be able to design teaching activities that enhance students' critical thinking. Instructors should shift the focus from vocabulary and grammar to discussions and reflections on humanities and social topics, encouraging students to express their opinions and ideas. Besides, instructors need to stimulate their ability for deep reflection and independent thinking. Instructors can improve their thinking abilities and levels through the approach named “bringing in and going out.” (1) Invite relevant experts to deliver a series of academic lectures to familiarize instructors with the basic knowledge and operational strategies of teaching critical thinking skills. (2) Utilize the opportunity of developing military vocational education to establish an online platform for critical thinking teaching resources, facilitating the sharing of high-quality teaching resources between military and civilian institutions. (3) Actively participate in teaching workshops on critical thinking instructional strategies, sharing and discussing strategies and methods for cultivating students' critical thinking abilities with foreign language teachers from military and civilian universities. (4) Encourage interested instructors to conduct classroom action research, using research to promote teaching, and helping instructors identify and reflect on problems that arise in teaching and consider solutions.

4.2. Shift in Students' Awareness of Thinking Development at Military Academies

In recent years, there have been different opinions regarding the learning of foreign languages among students at both military academies and civilian universities. Many students, especially those having military backgrounds, have no interest in English learning. They often suffer from a lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, and have problem in listening and speaking skills. Moreover, they doubt whether they will use English in their future combat positions. As a result, students show low enthusiasm for college English courses, which hinders the cultivation of their critical thinking abilities. It is the responsibility of the school and instructors to help students change their attitudes toward learning English in college.

It is essential to make good use of extracurricular activities and establish student leading organizations, such as thinking training clubs, to further develop students' critical thinking abilities. From the school level to the classroom level, students should be encouraged to voice their opinions, ask questions, and engage in reasonable questioning. Guidance and assistance should be provided to address any issues that arise during students' expression of personal viewpoints, creating an overall atmosphere of discussion and innovation.

4.3. Creating an Environment for Cultivating Critical Thinking Abilities at Military Academies

The cultivation of critical thinking abilities among military academy students should follow a “top-down” approach, where the encouragement and promotion of instructors at the institutional level play

a crucial role in creating a conducive environment for developing thinking skills. (1) The institution should clearly define the core position of cultivating critical thinking abilities in the talent development objectives, making it one of the guiding principles for English teaching activities. (2) Appropriate reforms should be made to the curriculum, such as adding courses or series of lectures that are more conducive to training critical thinking abilities. These courses can help students improve their understanding of concepts related to critical thinking, enabling them to consciously train and enhance their critical thinking abilities in English teaching activities. (3) Select English teaching materials that are conducive to cultivating students' critical thinking abilities, and use a more systematic and scientific approach to enhance their critical thinking skills. By implementing these measures, military academies can create an environment that fosters the development of critical thinking abilities among students. This will help students become more and more effective and independent thinkers, which is essential for their future roles in the military.

5. Summary

Currently, the cultivation of critical thinking abilities is in a phase of rapid development within military academies. If the College English course can take the lead in incorporating training for critical thinking abilities in classroom teaching design and activities, it will be at the forefront of the new round of institutional reforms, injecting sustained momentum into the cultivation of high-quality and professional military personnel in military academies.

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